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ABSTRACT

Although there is much scientific research available to guide educational decision making, decision making based on prevailing conventional wisdom continues. Five areas are conspicuous for relying on this type of decision making. First, grade retention has been shown in over 600 studies to be detrimental to the child, yet the conviction persists that a child who has not performed well in first grade should be retained. Second, if teachers have the knowledge and students want to learn, common sense would dictate that teachers should talk all the time and have the student remain silent, but over 500 studies show that total student silence is not the optimum method for learning. Third, a longer school year is assumed to be better, yet standardized tests are given in March or April, the time of peak student performance. Fourth, more rules are assumed to be better, yet studies on classroom management show that the optimum number of rules to be announced and enforced is five to seven. Finally, the teaching profession has been through the alternative certification cycle over and over when teacher demand exceeds teacher supply. Over time a concentration of teachers without pedagogical training has proved to be detrimental, yet alternative certification practices continue. (LL)

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"COMMON SENSE" VS. REALITY

by

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Before Galileo's time it was considered "common sense" or conventional wisdom that objects dropped from great heights "raced to the ground, filled with the joy of being nearly home" as an explanation for why they fell faster. Today physicists and mathematicians apply a formula to calculate the rate of descent for falling objects at any given second, given that the object is one that would not have its descent affected by the wind. This is a much more scientific approach than attributing human characteristics to inanimate objects.

There is much scientific research to guide decision-making in education. Some of it is contradictory because it was done on different populations and therefore has limited generalizability. But in spite of many studies done in several areas, across many segments of the population, several pieces of "common sense" persist in decision-making that have little or no basis in scientific fact.

Grade Retention

It might appear that a child who has not performed well in the first grade should be retained, or not promoted, for an additional year in the first grade before being promoted to what is presumed to be a more difficult grade, the second grade. But in over six hundred studies on retention (Holmes and Matthews, 1984), all but nine showed that "failing" or retaining children is detrimental for them. The nine that did not show detrimental results had a drastically different re-cycling year as a treatment; students were not sent back to the same set of conditions for a second year. One explanation for why the

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conventional wisdom did not work is that not everything about the second (or succeeding) grade is harder than the grade before.

Retained students step on the first rung of a downwardly spiraling At-Risk ladder (Slavin, Karweit, and Madden, 1989). If retention results in a lowered self esteem, the student may act out toward teachers or give up on trying to do schoolwork. This motivational pump is a very difficult one to re-prime once it stops. In most instances it would have been better to leave the student with his agemates and hope for a better year next year.

Minimum performance tests and mandatory flunkings only make this problem worse. Just because the law says that students must be flunked for failing a test does not undo the cycle of failure most students enter once this has taken place.

Student Talk, Teacher Talk

Common sense would dictate that if teachers have the knowledge and students want to learn, teachers should talk all the time and have the students remain silent. A certain amount of reasonable silence and attentativeness might be appreciated at times, but over 500 studies listed in an on-line computer search of Psychological Abstracts showed that total student silence is not the optimum method for learning. They learn more and remember it longer if they are allowed to ask questions about it, make comments related to the content, and hear each other's experiences related to the subject. As long as the discussion is about the topic, this give-and-take between teacher and students is the "stuff" of which memorable lessons are made.

"Students are not tea cups to be filled, but rather flowers to be watered and nurtured," one commentor said, and this describes what a

good verbal climate in the classroom should be. Parents should encourage children to ask questions about things they don't understand or share experiences that pertain to the lesson to the extent that the teacher desires.

More School Year Is Better

If more school year is better, why are all the standardized tests given in March and April? The test makers have recognized that students "peak out" by that time of the year and that it is downhill from there. It would be safe to say that most who contend for a 240 day academic school year have not taught in the classroom.

More Rules Are Better

Studies on classroom management show that the optimum number of rules to be announced and enforced is five to seven at most (Canter and Canter, 1976). With less than five, discipline may be too lax; with more than seven rules for students to remember, they are liable to spend their time in trouble unnecessarily. The relationship between the number of rules and the number of students off-task in most classroom settings is a U-shaped or curvilinear one. Misbehavior can't be totally legislated away because people are people and will make mistakes from time to time.

Experts As Teachers

As the song says, "When will they ever learn?" The teaching profession has been through the alternative certification cycle over and over in the history of this country. When working conditions run enough teachers off, people are hired who know the subject well but who do not know how to teach it. It's partly economic: these are easier to find than fully qualified teachers. Then in a few years it is found

that schools have become inhumane, barbaric institutions. The public becomes shocked at the abuses heaped upon our children. It is then demanded that teachers know more about children and teaching as well as knowing their subjects. The cycle then begins all over. After being staffed with well-educated, qualified teachers, people with political mileage to make begin using the schools as whipping boys again and as many as fifty percent of teachers begin leaving over the space of five years, as is now happening, according to several studies. When the demand for teachers becomes severe enough, virtually anyone who can exhale warm air is pressed into duty as a teacher.

Research by Berliner (1991) demonstrated that novices without any formal background in pedagogy did not comprehend when they had made instructional mistakes. Expert teachers with a teacher preparation background and typically ten years of experience anticipate potential mistakes before they are made and plan in a manner to avoid them.

All who are stakeholders in education need to begin looking at the findings of research more insightfully. Learning should be from our experiences instead of just passing through them. Then maybe we won't get tapped on the head by a lead ball from Galileo's tower.

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